Be Careful How You Ask ! Using Focus Groups and Nominal Group Technique to Explore the Barriers to Learning.

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Abstract

Schools have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils who experience barriers to learning. Inclusive approaches to data collection ensure that the needs of all children who are struggling are not overlooked. However it is important that the methods promote sustained reflection on the part of all children; don't inadvertently accentuate differences between pupils; nor allow individual needs to go unrecognized. This paper examines more closely the processes involved in using Nominal Group Technique to collect the views of children with and without a disability on the difficulties experienced in school. Data were collected on the process as well as the outcomes of using this technique to examine how pupil views are transformed from the individual to the collective, a process that involves making the private, public. Contrasts are drawn with questionnaire data, another method of data collection favoured by teachers. Although more time-efficient this can produce unclear and cursory responses. The views that surface from pupils need also to be seen within the context of the ways in which schools customise the data collection process and the ways in which the format and organization of the activity impact on the responses and responsiveness of the pupils.

Introduction

This paper is set within the context of a programme of work that was concerned with developing tools that schools can use to gather the views of children with a disability and meet their institutional obligations set out in a series of Disability Discrimination Acts (1995; 2005; 2010) to promote equality of opportunity. These legal duties, now set out in a draft Code of Practice (Equality & Human Rights Commission 2011) place the onus on *all* schools to adopt practices whereby children's views contribute to creating a responsive learning environment. It is important to investigate more closely the methods that schools may utilise and to recognize the temptation of surface compliance with statutory duties rather than engaging with the complexities of understanding children's experiences (Ruddock & Fielding 2006).

There are compelling arguments for adopting an inclusive approach to the collection of these views, one which ensures that *all* children contribute to making schools better places for learning. Gathering the views of only known disabled children is likely to ignore the needs of some children who are struggling. It is likely that schools don't know about the difficulties experienced by some disabled children, indeed they

may be unaware of the existence of a medical condition or impairment, especially where these are cyclical and hidden from view through absences from school or well honed self-management strategies (Porter et al 2009; 2010). Gathering the views of selected pupils also places undue emphasis on individualisation of need and fails to recognize that changes made with respect to specific children are often to the benefit of all.

The methods selected to gather these views need to be sensitive to the diversity of the pupil group otherwise it is likely that some voices might be more easily or readily listened to than others (Ruddock & Fielding 2006). Pedder & McIntyre (2006) draw attention to differences in the insights of high and low achieving children when they report on effective practices in teaching and learning in the classroom. While all pupils in their study conveyed knowledge about what motivates them and how they prefer to learn, higher achieving pupils were able to take into account the perspectives of others. Lower achieving pupils gave responses that were classed as more “practical” and less abstract. Pedder & McIntyre describe their data as consistent with a view that lower achieving pupils don’t share the same learning agenda, don’t have the language for articulating views about teaching and learning and don’t feel themselves to be full members of the same community as high achieving pupils. Many disabled children will not be “low achieving” although the evidence suggests that a number may well be under-achieving (Porter et al 2008). They may however be reticent to describe the barriers they encounter, especially in group settings. If we are to understand the processes that underlie the gathering of pupil views and enhance the achievements of pupils, it is important to recognize the diversity of views within the community and differences in the willingness of pupils to communicate these.

In the search for new and more engaging methods for gathering children’s perspectives an emphasis has been placed on open ended and less structured methods including photography, drawings, multi-media logs, graffiti walls, scrap-books and other non-traditional and creative methods (e.g. Punch 2002; Curtis et al 2004; Flutter & Ruddock 2004; Kirova 2006; Bragg 2007; Fielding 2009). These methods have the potential to foster the development of new insights among pupils, but teachers may view them as too time-consuming and the data difficult to collate and analyse. When schools are offered a choice of methods to use independently of a researcher, their preference appears to be for more structured and familiar approaches especially where these are time efficient (Porter et al 2008). Given the

restrictive nature of these choices, it is important to understand the processes at work during the collection of these data.

The current study examines data collected on the process and outcome of two focus groups carried out in a secondary school. Focus groups are seen to provide a more secure and supportive environment than the individual interview (Osborne & Collins 2001) and to have the potential to generate more ideas and to shift the power towards the participants. Yet rarely is data collected and analysed that highlights the processes involved (Massey 2011). The purpose of this study was to investigate the process of transformation from individual views to the collective. Porter (2011) in a separate study comparing the use of focus groups and questionnaires exemplifies the importance of recognizing the contextual nature of the data collection process and the ways in which slight differences in language can prompt quite different responses to questions. Asking children directly about “the barriers to learning” may fail to be understood by some pupils. However the ways in which the question format is differentiated using simplified language can result in an unintended emphasis on some aspects of schooling. For instance “what gets in the way of getting on in school” prompted the generation of items that concern relationships between pupils rather than barriers to achievement. The ways in which teachers differentiate can inadvertently accentuate differences between pupil groups compounding a view that some pupils have a different agenda around schooling.

The use of focus groups is widespread, including their use to collect data from children and young people with disability (Poston et al 2003; Tuffrey-Wijine et al 2007; Kroll et al 2007; Kaene & O’Connell 2010) although with some reservations where the person has significant communication difficulties. Focus groups vary with respect to the amount of structure and hence the control the researcher places on the direction and outcomes of the discussion. Traditionally the approach is seen to reside within a qualitative framework (Morgan 1997; Bryman 2004) used either as a stand alone method or as part of a mixed methods design where the underlying complexities of people’s views and perspectives can then be used to inform the development of a more structured tool (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009). Focus groups have however, also been described as a hybrid tool (Farnsworth & Boon 2010) reflecting departures from their origins in market research to their subsequent use across disciplines within health and social sciences (Morgan 1997). This has resulted in divergent views of the differences between focus groups and group interviews including the interaction between the researcher and researched as well as some uncertainty about the type of data analysis that is carried out. For some the role of

the researcher in a focus group is to stimulate discussion between participants rather than between the researcher and the participant, a characteristic of the group interview (Parker and Tritter 2006) with the purpose of understanding variations between participants' views rather than reaching a consensus.

These differences are also reflected in the analysis and reporting of focus group data, an under-developed area, reduced often to soundbite quotations to illustrate a theme (Farnsworth & Boon 2010; Massey 2011). There are opportunities to analyse both emerging themes and learn about the frequency with which certain views are help, thereby providing both quantitative as well as qualitative data. As Parker and Tritter (2006) state:

"what often emerges…is a number of positions or views that capture the majority of the participants' standpoints. Focus group discussions rarely generate a consensus but they do tend to create a number of views which different proportions of the group support"p31

Massey (2011) provides a model of three levels of data analysis; articulated, based on participants answer to the question(s) and prompts; attributional, drawing on the researchers a prior theories and hypotheses to search for signs or signals that fit the theory; and thirdly emergent, where new insights from the data, the larger themes, arise unasked in the experiential data provided by the participants. Others have also argued that observations of interactions between participants, an integral aspect of focus group design need to inform the analysis and portrayal of the data alongside temporal information so that due attention is given to the way something is said, how viewpoints are "maintained, modified, reinforced or rejected" and to non-verbal cues that accompany these proceedings (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009).

Nominal Group Technique

One type of focus group, Nominal Group Technique (NGT) was developed in 1972 by Van de Ven & Delbecq as a way of trying to avoid peoples' responses being tailored to the interviewer's nonverbal responses and where language barriers intrude as researchers fail to find the right argot, this method could be seen as being well suited to research with young people. The format usually combines cycles of individual and group activity as individuals start by thinking or representing in some way their own ideas prior to sharing them (if they wish) one at a time with the group in a round robin. When all the ideas have been given they are clarified for the group

through discussion and then prioritized through multivoting. The facilitator of the group characteristically acts as an impartial leader and does not contribute to the list. The pre-fix nominal suggests that it is a group in name only, MacPhail (2001) refers to them as a non-interacting group with the emphasis on individual judgements but with the benefit of the group effect on generating a wider array of ideas.

The method has a number of advantages. As Lomax and McClennan (1984) state the creation of the initial individual list and its prioritising offsets the likelihood that students are influenced by the reactions of others and that the views of one or two individuals do not dominate, thereby making the group easier to manage. Each person has an equal opportunity to participate (MacPhail 2001). However, Lomax and McClennan (1984) also note that the person's identity and confidence in reading items can influence other students. More ideas are generated using this method than others but it does not require a lot of additional record keeping, again making it a method that is efficient on teacher time. There is also less need for respondent validation as the importance of each item is considered as part of the prioritizing (MacPhail 2001) . In effect the pupils code their own data, reaching agreement on categories and coding them accordingly with less opportunity for the researcher to impose their own view. This can be viewed as equivalent to Massey's (2011) first level of analysis.

This paper uses data from a secondary school who took part in exploratory work to examine more closely the processes involved in using NGT to collect the views of children with and without a disability on the barriers to learning. Previous research has identified the ways in which differences in question phrasing can lead to divergent views and in the interests of ensuring that all children could access the group the topic was presented as "what makes things difficult at school ?" The school also took part in trialling the use of an anonymous online questionnaire which had been developed as an alternative method to collect pupil views on the barriers to learning (Porter et al 2008). Here children were asked the question "What makes things difficult at different times and places." It therefore provided an opportunity to consider the relationship of the responses collected through another format.

The purpose of the data analysis reported here is to examine how pupil views are transformed through the use of NGT: How are views maintained, modified and prioritised or rejected ? Do some pupils' views hold more sway than others ? Does commonality lead to prioritising ? In examining the process of transformation from individual to collective, the analysis also explores the shift from private to public. The

collection of data from these pupils together with their year group in an anonymous online questionnaire provides a specific contextual framework from which to explore these processes and therefore the additional question for this study is:
How does the information provided through focus groups differ to that gathered using an online questionnaire

The Study

The study was carried out in a boys secondary school serving a relatively affluent urban area and with a lower than average proportion of pupils (c5%) with identified needs. The aim of the school was to set the highest standard in all areas of life. Focus groups were carried out with two groups of six pupils in year 9 using the same question. The room was selected to reinforce the notion that this was not a lesson. The first group included a pupil with a hearing impairment, one with ADHD, two with dyslexia and two with social communication difficulties (one of whom was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome) and were selected by the teacher from amongst the volunteering year 9 pupils with disability and or SEN as most likely to be happy to talk in a group setting. The second volunteer group were withdrawn from an English lesson and had no identified additional needs. Both focus groups were conducted at the same time of day, in the same room with the boys sitting singly at a desk in three rows of two.

The teacher adapted the way that she presented the planned NGT task to form a 35 minute activity with limited discussion and two rounds of voting. She introduced the activity to re-explain the project and the researchers presence and to ensure the pupils understood what they had consented to take part in. She explained to both groups that we wanted to know “what made things difficult at school”. She clarified that it was for them as an individual (rather than theoretical) and that it was confidential. They were given five minutes to record their thoughts and given a target of ten ideas. To give them a strategy for doing this they were encouraged to think through the school day

“Think about how you come to school, think about what happens when you arrive at school, think about what happens when you line up in the morning .. think about what happens when you go to your first lesson, think about the lessons during the day, what happens between them, now you’ll probably all have slightly different ideas about what makes school difficult”.

“What makes school difficult” was written on the board and after their allotted five minutes they were asked for an idea each. The teacher went round the group twice and then asked for any additional ideas that were not already on the chart.
The boys were then asked to vote using slightly different procedures in the two groups. Group 1 were asked to vote first for their top ten using a tally system to enable them to keep track of how many votes they had cast. This was followed by the teacher drawing attention to items that they had all voted for and then inviting them to prioritize these by casting two further votes. The second group were asked also to vote for their top ten and again attention was drawn to the top items but no further prioritizing took place at this point although later she asked them to look back at their own individual lists and indicate their top 3. Both groups were asked to choose one of three areas that had received the most votes and in pairs consider how they might overcome these barriers. The researcher observed and taped the session and collected the papers on which the boys had written their list.

The whole of year 9 were subsequently given an online questionnaire to do at a time when they all had access to a computer (an IT lesson). Following a brief introduction explaining the purpose of the questionnaire, a series of simple questions were presented asking pupils “How do you generally feel at different times and in different places” and asking them to rate their experiences during lessons, break, lunchtime, outside moving between buildings, on school trips and during other special events, using a six point likert scale illustrated with smiley faces. They were then asked two open questions “Can you tell us a little more ? What helps ?” and “What makes things more difficult ?” and data from the latter forms part of the analysis provided below.

Ethical Issues

Ethical approval was sought from the University ethics committee. In line with BERA guidelines (BERA 2004) all children were recruited through asking for volunteers with information provided to pupils about the study, its purpose and outcomes. Not all children who volunteered turned up to take part suggesting that pupils not only consented but did not feel pressurised to take part (Fargas-Malet et al 2010). Pupils were given information about the study again immediately preceding the data collection. In order to facilitate understanding of the process pupils were reminded of previous experience of carrying out the research using these tools. It was explained how the information would be used and that their individual responses would be anonymous. Optional contact information was provided at the end of the questionnaire for individuals who would like to speak to someone directly and they

were invited to name who this would be. Survey data was pass-word protected accessed only by members of the research team via a secure entry point. The staff involved and the school governors were provided with a report containing group data and without any identifying individual characteristics.

Group 1

The SEN/Disability group wrote between them 45 items with individual lists of between 6 and 10 items and as a group proffered 15 different issues that made school difficult. It was clear that some found the initial generation of the list easier than others, as tapping fingers, leg jigging and looking around, were frequently observed although all pupils were very quiet.

Place table 1 about here

Table 1 lists the items in the order that they were offered by the boys. Initial items included very impersonal aspects of school life (overpacked bag, water fountain shortage) – as if testing the parameters of what it might be appropriate to volunteer. These items did have some salience amongst the group. The first item to be offered to the group appeared on two pupil lists and the second on three. Notably no boy gave their first written item in round 1, but one was offered in the second round and one in round three.

This group list provides a mixture of learning related and personal need items. The relationships that were uppermost were with teachers rather than other pupils. Teachers featured in four of the 15 offerings. “One sided teachers” was offered by the third child in the round robin and was number 4 on his individual list of things. The first three things that he overlooked to offer this were “tired” (offered later), “boredom” and “homework” (an offering that another child was to make). Teachers featured again but not until the 10th offering: “Just before exams teachers go over and over everything everyday”. This item in fact was not on the child’s written list and gained only two votes in the first round. “A subject you like but you don’t like the teacher” was offered 14th and had been first on that child’s list. This resonated with others as it was subsequently voted for by 5 out of 6 children. The final 15th item was “teachers don’t listen to you” which had featured 9th on the offering child’s list and was voted for by all 6 children. Teachers featured in every child’s list so it wasn’t surprising when it attracted a number of votes.

Outcome of Voting

In the first round of voting seven aspects were voted for by all 6 pupils. These were:

- one-sided teachers;
- exams- too much stuff in them;
- tired;
- lots of homework on the same day;
- teachers don't listen to you;
- when the bell doesn't go on time;
- not liking a subject.

The first five of these were prioritised when the group were given 2 votes each. These were issues that all six pupils had voted for in the previous round. They were offered to the group by four of the six boys with one boy having two of his ideas taken up by the group.

On the one hand it is perhaps unsurprising that exams were second highest in final votes given the time of the year that the groups were held. On the other hand they only featured in the lists of two children- one simply said exams and the other wrote having lots of tests in the day.

For this group then, while commonly held views were prioritised through voting, some which had not been initially thought of by most boys, appeared to resonate across the group. The system of voting only allowed for prioritizing on unanimous items. Therefore exams made it into the final list but "subjects you like but don't like the teacher" didn't.

Group 2

The second focus group were presented by the teacher with a slightly different voting procedure but were also asked to think first and make a list this time of a *minimum* of 10 items . A larger number of items were generated in the initial lists as 77 items were produced between the boys (ranging from 8-17). In this second group all commenced writing straight away, pausing at different points to think with some looking at each other. A member of this group checked that the teacher wanted to know what they experienced to which she clarified "what you personally find difficult". The round robin again produced fifteen issues. This group responded more confidently and on only one occasion did the teacher ask a pupil to explain more fully. Having clarified the task the first three items proffered: "Exams and the pressure to do well"; "being tired at school"; and "forgetting books and equipment", were offered more assertively. The issue of teachers was introduced fourth and phrased

indirectly “Not having work set at the correct level” and was quickly followed by reference to other pupils with “people disrupting”.

Insert table 2 about here

Although the first item to be suggested in this round robin was 14th on that pupil’s list it was later voted for by an additional 4 pupils. Two boys subsequently offered their first choice, again with items that gained the votes of others. Boys elaborated on what they had written on their lists without being requested to do so.

Outcome of Voting

When each pupil was allocated ten votes the following top issues emerged:

- not having work set at the correct level (6)
- missing lessons/exams due to other activities (6)
- groups being punished rather than individuals (5)
- pressure to do well in exams (5)
- people disrupting (4)
- dealing with teachers you don’t get on with (4).

The top two items, “not having work set at the correct level” and “missing lessons/exams due to other activities” were offered 4th and 14th in the round robin and appeared to be later thoughts of both respondents as they were 7th and 8th in their respective lists. Looking at the full written lists of other boys the topic of having work that was set at the appropriate level was expressed in a number of ways by each of the pupils: e.g. “being in a class where the abilities are too mixed”; “not learning new skills in games/PE; having work set to your level”; “doing things in lessons that you think are useless”; “work at your capability”; “being put in the wrong set”; “not being set appropriate work”. Likewise it is unsurprising that exams feature in the top 6 as they appear in the written lists of four pupils. The item “missing lessons/exams due to other activities” in contrast appears to be a bit of a wild card in that it features in only two other lists: “missing out on lessons due to other activities” and “missing out on parts of lessons due to music/other activities”. The item, having been raised, appears to have resonated with three additional boys. While there are consistencies in the final votes, pupils individual lists were more wide ranging than those that appeared under the final list of priorities. Individual lists included many items to do with personal organisation with issues of remembering and losing equipment, what lesson to go to, being late and missing out on notices and on lunch, noisy and overcrowded spaces, rumours circulating about people and people being obstructive

in the corridors. No one person's views dominated in the top list, Pupil F did not have any items represented and Pupil D had two, otherwise, each boy had one item voted for by the group.

Pupils in this second group were also asked to indicate the three most important aspects in their own list which led to slightly more disparate responses but suggested that the overall priorities are still well represented. Three pupils rated first the item that they offered first to the group suggesting that they had been particularly confident in sharing their views. However there are also some personal issues that were not offered in the group setting at all despite being important to the individual e.g. "Being ill for a long time and not know what is going on and having to catch up" rated third; "pressure to perform" also rated third. Pupils individual top three are set out in table 3.

Insert table 3 about here

This alternative form of prioritizing provided an individual perspective to put alongside the group priorities.

Comparing Groups

Given the findings of Pedder and Macintyre (2006) and those of Porter (2011) a comparison was made between the two focus groups as previous research had highlighted the ways in which the social aspects of schooling featured more highly amongst some groups of pupils. Table 4 reveals the relationship between the group responses in that 8 of the items (listed first in the table) are similar but there are also some interesting differences. While Group 1 struggle with too much- homework, books in the bag, checking of uniforms, repetition from the teacher, Group 2 appear more success orientated so their difficulties are things that stop them doing well e.g. being late, missing lessons, not having work at the right level. These differences are illustrated further when the priorities are examined. Group 1 are tired, there's too much work, people do not listen to you or aren't fair, whereas for Group 2 the pressure to do well is compounded by people disrupting lessons, work set at the wrong level and the whole group being punished rather than those that transgress. These concerns of the second group were highlighted by their later discussion of how to remove these barriers, namely in their view that teachers need to be better trained to manage classes and to differentiate their teaching. Notably there is a narrower consensus in Group 2 than Group 1.

Insert table 4 about here

Questionnaire Data

136 pupils in year 9 completed the questionnaire and 67 (66%) of the nondisabled pupils provided qualitative comments in response to a question on what makes things difficult at different times and places. Six of these suggested that either they found nothing difficult or they simply did not know. The remainder provided diverse comments usually a single word or short phrase e.g. “busy, dangerous areas” or “tiredness and stuff” although three pupils wrote at greater length:

“Not being able to talk, class mates can be just as informative as teachers. Teachers that are arrogant or have an imposing presence. My most enjoyable lessons are those I do best in and share a friendly relationship with the teacher. Larger classrooms also seem to slow down learning”

The main theme concerned the behaviour of other pupils (16 responses) with lessons (13 responses) and teachers mood and behaviour (11) also featuring. Concerns were expressed about people messing around in class (7) and of working with people you didn’t like or didn’t know (5) and of not being with your friend (4). There were concerns about feeling intimated by other children (3). Issues relating to moving between lessons were raised including there being not enough time between lessons (4) not knowing where lessons were or what they were (3) and getting lost, the difficulty of moving around school and the crowds in corridors (4) and changing rooms (1). Individual aspects of feeling tired (4) suffering from hay fever (2) being hungry (2) and lunch being inadequate (3) being hot (3) and thirsty (1) were also mentioned. Notably no pupil wrote about not having work set at the appropriate level.

In addition there were 34 pupils who indicated on the questionnaire that they had a disability and 28 (82%) provided information about what makes things more difficult, albeit one response simply stated they did not know. Again the length of responses varied with two more detailed answers:
Lessons are hard when the teacher is difficult, or when the kids around me don’t STOP TALKING ! I find it hard to feel alright in that atmosphere.

Not nowing what my lessons are; I get hayfever; Games and PE on the same day

Other responses were briefer and less transparent e.g. “*teachers*”; “*people being stupid*”.

There was a range of aspects that made life difficult although teachers featured less heavily (6) than the behaviour of other pupils (10) including pupils messing around (4) and chavs/bullies (3) feeling intimidated by older pupils (2) or simply *"people you do not like being there*". Otherwise comments were largely individual and included dealing with crowds, long days, difficulty getting around the school, insufficient time between lessons, an imbalance of lessons, and feeling tired, thirsty, hungry and having hay-fever. In many respects the responses were not dissimilar to those listed by their peers.

Discussion

This research formed part of ongoing developmental work with schools to examine what happens when schools use different tools to collect the views of all children about what they find difficult in school. This work supports schools in selecting appropriate data collection tools that will enable them to meet their obligations to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils. Secondary schools typically select structured methods to survey pupils (Porter et al 2008) in contrast to the more open ended methods that feature in reviews of good practice (Bragg 2007;Fielding 2009). The analysis of the NGT approach used here has enabled us to examine more closely the processes involved in these focus groups, particularly temporal aspects in the formation of views: how views are maintained, modified or rejected and how, despite the lack of discussion, social processes contribute to both individual and group views. The views that are shared with the group need to be situated within the context in which they are offered. Although the full analysis of the questionnaire is not presented here (for reasons of space) it provides an important additional commentary on eliciting pupil views in different contexts.

Temporal

The analysis revealed how the first item a pupil chooses to share with the group is not necessarily the first they thought of. The process of setting a target of 10 or more encouraged pupils to think hard about the topic with more effort in some cases being rewarded by more pertinent items arising. More time spent reflecting appeared to raise important issues and this was particularly true of the first group where only one of the items they all voted for had been somebody's initial thought, more commonly these were 4th, 5th or even 9th on the generating persons list. Arguably the teachers instruction to think about their day might also have contributed to the order of items generated, although this was less apparent in the responses of Group 2. Identifying exactly what you find difficult is not an easy task but having a target that sets an

expectation of reflection encourages longer responses. This can be compared to the questionnaire responses for which no pupil produced ten items. Indeed between 18% of the disabled and 34% of the nondisabled pupils did not give any qualitative responses at all. A few clearly also found it difficult to know what to write. While a few gave lengthy responses in the questionnaire it is unclear how much thought other pupils gave into making their responses. This contrasts to the presence of the "wild card" in Group 2 where items that had not been considered before are raised during the process of the focus group and their relevance is reflected in the votes of other group members. This setting appeared to encourage pupils to be more engaged with the issues.

However, it would be hasty to conclude that the focus groups produced more valid responses. The non-verbal behaviour of the first group suggested that they were unsure what rules were operating in that setting and did not benefit in the same way as Group 2 by asking specifically for clarification. Hyden and Buclow (2010) note how adult focus group members start by establishing common ground before extending and expanding on this. This may partially explain why Group 1 responses were stated more tentatively and required greater clarification of meaning. Massey (2011) observes:

"Participants are likely to limit their conversation to content that exposes them to least controversy" p24

Interestingly teachers featured more in the verbal responses than was apparent in the questionnaire where other pupils were also seen to make life difficult. This could be a feature of the social context, teachers' behaviour being a common bond between pupils and therefore one which is perceived to get group support. Conversely, the very controlled nature of the NGT setting with limited opportunities for interaction did not immediately prompt thoughts of other pupils.

Clearly also there were items that were particularly topical/seasonal including lack of drinking water and exams. Although Lomax and McClennan (1984) refer to these as transitory items which will be superseded at other points in the year, nevertheless they may be particularly important issues at this point in time.

Dominance

While the group process generated more items and inspired additional views for some young people, the outcomes were not dominated by one or two individuals.

Indeed the final prioritized lists had ideas offered by four and five of the six pupils in each respective group. The lack of opportunity for discussion may have mitigated against this happening although this does not remove the influence of a confident or assertive presentation or the possibility of a chance remark swaying the outcome (Lomax and McClennan 1984). The fine level analysis revealed consistency in the ways that pupils responded. Teachers were prominent in the lists of each child in the first group and therefore it wasn't surprising that their behaviour featured in the final votes of Group 1. Equally the top-rated difficulty "not having work set at the correct level" was expressed in a number of different ways but featured on each pupil list in Group 2. There was therefore consistency in the responding.

Notably however there were also individual personal items that were not offered up to the group. Data from Group 2 suggests that these may be important items for pupils but which are not felt to be appropriate for presentation in a group setting. There is therefore a danger that personally relevant information is lost through NGT unless it is followed up by individual discussion. The method of voting of the second group allowed the discrepancy between the individual and the group to emerge.

Lomax and MClennan (1984) suggest that there is a danger in restricting votes to five items as aspects of medium concern to all are not reflected in the outcomes. Here pupils used a tally system to keep track of the allocation of votes, making it possible to cast 10 votes. The method used here with Group 1 was to reach a clear group consensus through two rounds of prioritizing. Arguably the method used with Group 2 was better in providing insights into both shared as well as individual concerns.

Differences between the groups

Given the importance of gathering the views of all children it is a matter of equity to ensure that the approach is appropriately inclusive and there were differences between the groups, both with respect to the process and the outcome. In Group 1 fewer items were generated by the list writing and this may reflect the fact that its not the choice of medium for some of this group who struggle with writing tasks. In hindsight Group 2 were proactive in clarifying the task demands in a way that might have benefited Group 1. Group 2 communicated clearly with the teacher and offered elaboration unprompted, they were confident in conveying their ideas. They were also more likely to give the initial item on their list first. In contrast the teacher played a more central role as facilitator with Group 1 asking them to expand on their list. Although Group 1 shared many of the views of the second group there were also differences when it came to voting for the most important. Group 2 provided a more

detailed analysis of their difficulties and had looked to locate the cause of them, going beyond the simple expression of feelings of dislike that was more typical of Group 1. Group 2 difficulties were largely around impediments to higher achievement rather than more general aspects that made life difficult. (However notably this difference was not apparent in the questionnaire data). Group 2 had a narrower range of responses which may reflect the sharing of particular experiences as part of the same English group with the possibility for a number of taken-for-granteds. Certainly there was a sub-text apparent in some of the non-verbal responses and comments that suggested that members of the group knew to which teacher a person was referring. Thus while the group had no opportunity for discussion, prior experience served to illustrate particular aspects.

Contextual Issues

While schools in the UK now have a duty to "take positive steps to ensure that disabled pupils can fully participate in the education" (EHRC 2011 para 7.3) but the methods they use to find out about the barriers pupils encounter are ones of choice. Further, the ways in which schools use and adapt these data collection tools reflect their approach to disability as well as wider characteristics of the school ethos. The school in this study were committed to being part of this research and set aside valuable curriculum time in order to use the methods. It was the second year in which they had collected this data (although only the first in which there had been direct researcher input). The previous year they had used NGT only with those pupils with a known disability and the questionnaire with the whole year group. In many respects their approach to both methods was indistinguishable from other school tasks, ones in which teachers directed and controlled the action. When analysed from a pedagogic perspective the insertion of NGT into the everyday life of a classroom can represent a shift towards a more participative and dialogic form of interaction. The school was traditional in the approach to teaching and pupils revealed that teachers reverted to didactic methods when pupils misbehaved. Pupils for the NGT therefore sat formally at desks and the tasks were ones to be completed within a prescribed time period using a heavily structured approach. The job for pupils was to work out what sort of response was expected, what rules were operating. It appears that pupils were quick to identify what kind of items it was appropriate to offer in a group setting and which ones to keep private, which items were likely to have the support of others and which were personal difficulties. Notably however this did not lead to pupils offering only responses that teachers might want to hear.

This distinction between the public and the private was less obvious in the anonymous online questionnaire where personally distressing items were also offered. Arguably however the distinction between private and public is blurred for presenters of online personal information (West et al 2009) One pupil wrote for example that “not having any clothes” was a particular difficulty and another of “being neglected by people” and another of “being on your own”. Notably none of these issues were offered in the focus group data, where the audience is more transparent. The social setting of the data collection method conditioned the types of responses that were seen by the group as permissible to state.

The possible lack of distinction between the private and the public with online questionnaires surfaces a number of ethical dilemmas that researchers face working in school contexts. There are contradictory forces at play which are surfaced in recent literature. The first of these is that pupils appear to respond to online formats with more self- disclosure, although the evidence for this is limited and largely with known audiences (Denissen et al 2010; Valkenburg et al 2011). Of relevance however to this study is the finding that online disclosure can be seen as a rehearsal for off-line disclosure (Valkenburg et al 2011). Web-based research methods appear to offer a greater sense of anonymity and therefore people feel more secure and less inhibited than in a more traditional face to face medium (Denissen et al 2010). The second of these arises from the ethos of the school conditions and the ways in which these methods are adapted and presented which may constrain this sense of anonymity. Elsewhere concern has been raised that questionnaires can be experienced as “just another piece of homework” (Denscombe & Aubrook 1992). These two forces illustrate the tensions around informed consent and about the pupils’ interpretation and understanding concerning their engagement in the research activity. This is particularly acute where schools act as gatekeepers, go-betweens and implementers of the research tools (Heath et al 2007).

Conclusion

The purpose of the article is to examine the process of deploying NGT rather than to generalize from the data. The focus groups were limited in number and formed a small percentage of the overall population. As the questionnaire was anonymous it precludes direct comparison between different modes of pupil response. However there are interesting similarities between data collected elsewhere on pupil views. “Teachers not being fair”; “teachers not listening”; “teachers pick on you” are in the top four responses of a focus group asked the same question in a previous study by

Porter (2011). The advantage for students in this study was that they were encouraged to consider how they could be proactive in responding to these difficulties. This follow-up discussion was empowering for both disabled and non-disabled students.

The aim of the study was to consider how expressed views were transformed in the process of using the NGT and whether this method had advantages over the use of a questionnaire. The data revealed that NGT is an avenue for individual as well as group responses giving the participant the opportunity to keep some views between the facilitator and themselves. This is particularly important where the topic is sensitive. The structure of NGT prescribes the role of an adult as listener and recorder of the information intervening only to clarify that they have understood. NGT also provides extended space for pupils to reflect and this may be particularly important where pupils are less articulate, less confident or require more time. The group setting stimulates pupils to engage with the question and to consider a wide range of aspects with the opportunity to clarify the expectations- namely that the question to be considered is not an abstract or theoretical one. A second round of personal voting acknowledges that consensus is not the only valued outcome and recognizes as the teacher stated that “all will have slightly different ideas about what makes school difficult”. This can be a starting point for further individual dialogue. The supportive tally voting system used here together with the opportunity for both group and individual prioriziting, followed by discussion of how to respond to these difficulties are useful devices to ensure that all pupils gain from the process. NGT therefore provides a useful setting to engage a group of pupils in sustained reflection and the structure is helpful for the novice data gatherer (MacPhail 2001). However the decision to limit pupil discussion provided little opportunity to gain a more nuanced understanding of the meanings as it reduced the opportunities for pupils to expand or contradict the experiences of others.

The strengths and limitations of NGT can be set alongside those of other methods. Questionnaires may be preferred by teachers as a time-efficient method of asking all pupils for their views with online versions quickly providing a report of the data, but their limitations should be recognized. Although questionnaires provide anonymity, there is little opportunity for targeted follow-up unless pupils are explicitly encouraged to come forward through being asked who they would like to talk to and to volunteer their name. Opportunities for follow-up are important as questionnaires can provide incomplete insights as the responses are often terse and limited to one or two word written responses. Equally many pupils may elect not to give responses at all. This

could indicate that pupils experience little or no difficulties or that they are not convinced that their difficulties if exposed would be addressed. It is important that where questionnaires are used, pupils are confident that their views are valued and that action will occur as a result. Schools therefore need to share the overall outcomes of the questionnaire (whilst being mindful of issues of confidentiality) and to indicate what changes will happen as a result.

The culture of the school shapes the choice of approach to collecting the views of children and how it is adapted for everyday use. In creating spaces for "listening" to pupils there are important opportunities to demonstrate recognition, respect and acknowledgement of the diversity of their experiences. This is a complex and demanding task, unlikely to be achieved as a single discrete activity. Schools may favour structured methods characterised by step by step guidelines and easily aggregated group data but in making choices between methods and how they are utilised they need to be mindful about the way in the format and organization of the activity impacts on both the responses and the responsiveness of pupils. Both questionnaires and focus groups should be seen as a first step in establishing a new dialogue with pupils including those whose difficulties have been previously unrecognized in order that schools may make appropriate adjustments to their policies, practices and procedures and provide equality of opportunity for all.

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	Items as offered in order	Item order on list of child offering the item	First voting round- maximum per item =6	Second voting round – selection limited to items that scored 6 on the previous round
1	Overpacked bag	3	1	
2	Not enough water (drinking fountains)	8	3	
3	One-sided teachers	4	6	4
4	Standing up on the bus for half an hour	2	1	
5	When the bell doesn't go on time	2	6	
6	Exams- too much stuff in them	5	6	3
7	Tired	1	6	2
8	Lunch-time run out of food	3/4/6	3	
9	Distractions- something going on in school, out of the window	6	4	
10	Just before exams teachers go over and over everything every day	Not on list	2	
11	Lots of homework on the same day	4	6	1
12	Uniform- spend time checking it	4	4	
13	Not liking a subject	2	6	
14	Subject u like but don't like the teacher	1	5	
15	Teachers don't listen to you	9	6	2

Table 1: Items offered by Group 1 and the outcome of voting

	Item as offered	Item order on list of child that offers the item	First voting round- maximum votes per item =6
1	Exams- pressure to do well	14	5
2	Being Tired at school	1	3
3	Forgetting books and appointments	5	3
4	Not having work set at the correct level	7	6
5	People disrupting	1	4
6	Being hungry or thirsty at school	4	3
7	Dealing with teachers you don't get on with	1	4
8	Being uninterested in topic or lesson	9	3
9	Poor facilities	4	2
10	Having teachers who don't properly explain what they want you to do	10	2
11	Water fountains being at opposite ends of the school	Not on list	3
12	Groups punished rather than individuals	7	5
13	Others leaving litter in the yard and we get punished	3	1
14	Missing out on exams due to other activities	8	6
15	Being late for school and lessons	4 &5	2

Table 2: Items offered by Group 2 and the outcome of voting

Pupil A	Pupil B	Pupil C	Pupil D	Pupil E	Pupil F
Being in a class where the abilities are too mixed (1)	People disrupting the lesson (1) Offered 1st	Exams pressure (1)	Exams pressure (1) Offered 1st	People disturbing the lesson (1)	Not being set appropriate work/homework (1)
Missing out on lessons due to other activities (2)	General lack of control in class (2)	Rememberi ng all the books and equipment (2)	Having teachers that I don't get on with (2) Offered 2nd	Work at your capability (2)	Exams (2)
Being punished as a group rather than individuals being punished (3) Offered 2nd	Getting punished for being associated with a group (3)	Pressure to perform (3)	Doing things in lessons that you think are useless (3)	Being ill for a long time and not know what is going on and having to catch up (3)	Failure to get on with certain teachers (3)

Table 3: Group 2 Individual top three and if offered in the round robin

Group 1	Voted for by 4-6 pupils	Group 2	Voted for by 4-6 pupils
Exams- too much stuff in them	*	Exams- pressure to do well	*
Tired	*	Being tired at school	
Lunch-time-run out of food		Being hungry or thirsty at school	
Not liking a subject	*	Being uninterested in topic or lesson	
Subject you like but don't like the teacher	*	Dealing with teachers you don't get on with	*
Not enough water (drinking fountains)		Water fountains being at the opposite end of the school	
Distractions- something going on in school	*	People disrupting	*
One-sided (unfair) teachers	*	Groups punished rather than individuals	*
Teachers don't listen to you	*	Others leaving litter in yard and we get punished	
Just before exams teachers go over and over everything every day		Not having work set at the correct level	*
Lots of homework on the same day	*	Missing lessons/exams due to other activities	*
Overpacked bags		Forgetting books and equipment	
Standing up on the bus for half an hour		Poor facilities	
When the bell does not go on time	*	Being late for schools and lessons	
Uniform- spend time checking it	*	Having teachers that don't properly explain what they want you to do	

Table 4 Comparison of the responses and priorities of Group 1 and 2